



## BACKGROUND

# Popular Initiatives in Austria

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A *Volksbegehren*, or popular initiative, is one of three instruments of direct democracy guaranteed by the Austrian constitution. Unlike a referendum, it is not legally binding; nevertheless, the issue raised by a popular initiative must be discussed by Parliament when its support exceeds 100,000 valid signatures. Hence, such initiatives can fuel the public debate, but often don't result in legislation.

For a popular initiative to be brought before the electorate, however, its initiators must demonstrate sufficient support through separate *Unterstützungserklärungen* (statements of support). Currently, 8,032 signatures are required by law, that is one one-thousandth of the electorate, based on 2011 consensus data; and those signatures are already to be included when the initiative goes public. If this benchmark is successfully passed, the Interior Ministry will set a period of time, usually one week, when anyone legally allowed to vote, can sign it.

Of the 34 popular initiatives, probably most significant was the first of its kind, demanding less political influence on the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF). It was initiated by legendary journalist and commentator Hugo Portisch, then *Kurier* editor-in-chief, and con-

sequently supported by 832,353 individuals (17.27% in popular support). The heart of this influential popular initiative became the cornerstone of the first ORF reform of 1967.

Other significant initiatives include the controversial 1975 initiative against the so-called *Fristenregelung* – the law permitting the termination of a pregnancy within the first three months. Despite almost 900,000 signatures, the law was not changed.

Most successful in terms of popular support was the initiative against the construction of the Austria Center in 1982, which scored 1.36 million signatures (25.74% of the electorate). Nevertheless, the Center – located today next to the United Nations in Vienna's 22nd district – was

built and opened in 1987. Most controversial was the anti-immigrant popular initiative *Österreich zuerst* (Austria first), initiated by the FPÖ in 1993. Still 416,531 individuals, or 7.35% of the electorate, supported the initiative, despite the powerful *Lichtermeer*-protests on 23 January 1993 – the largest peaceful demonstrations in Austria's history since the end of World War II.

Industrialist and former Social democratic Finance Minister Hannes Androsch launched the most recent popular initiative, the *Bildungsvolksbegehren* (popular initiative for an education reform) in November 2011. Despite strong financial, political and media support, just over 6% of the electorate – or 383,724 individuals – lent its support. ◇

### Popular Initiatives since 1964 (selection)

Pro ORF reform (1964)

Against *Fristenregelung*, anti-abortion (1975)

Against the construction of Austria Center (1982)

Anti-immigrant *Österreich zuerst* (1993)

Against plantation of genetically-modified crops (1997)

Against Temelin, the Czech nuclear power plant (2002)

Against purchase of Eurofighter planes (2002)

For educational reform (2011)

# of signatures

% of participation

832,353	17.27	
895,665	17.93	
1,361,562	25.74	
416,531	7.35	
1,225,790	21.23	
914,973	15.53	
624,807	10.65	
383,724	6.07	